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# **Friendships with Benefits? Examining the Role of Friendship in Semi-Structured Interviews within Music Research**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the ‘methodology of friendship’ and its wider potential within music research. Drawing on two research examples that made use of ‘friendship’ in distinct fashions - one that explores music listening practices in everyday life and the other, music as a site for racialisation - the article discusses how friendship can be incorporated within semi-structured interviews. The case studies act as examples of how to negotiate alterity in music research and how friendship represents a potential for gathering more detailed data. The notion of ‘alterity’, at the core of research relationships is critical to shift the conversation to an informal tone and improve the depth of the discourses gathered from informants. Consequently, this article addresses debates within qualitative (music) sociology by reconsidering friendship as an axis of power and examines the nature of the data gathered in semi-structured interviews through the methodology of friendship.

**Keywords: Alterity; Insider Knowledge; Listening Practices; Methodology of Friendship; Sociology of Music.**

7975 words, including references

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## Introduction

This article explores different uses and manifestations of the methodology of ‘friendship’ in qualitative empirical research in music sociology. Music is a very peculiar cultural object, notably due to its ‘ubiquity’ (see Kassabian, 2013) and its association with various aspects of everyday life (see DeNora, 2000). Empirical research about the ways in which music is present within everyday life and how it mediates social relationships tends to include various types of participants, including ‘normal individuals’ (DeNora, 2000; Lilliestam, 2013; Martin, 2006), in an age when all individuals are supposedly music ‘amateurs’ (Hennion *et al.*, 2000). Music also has the potential to connect people (DeNora, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In this regard, the relationship between the researcher and their participants may vary, from the very beginning of empirical research, or within the unfolding context of empirical research.

Social researchers constantly seek to develop new empirical tools that will better their ‘sociological imagination’ (Wright-Mills, 1962). In contemporary societies that are said to have become increasingly complex (see Urry, 2006), some authors point to the ‘coming crisis’ of empirical sociology (see Beer, 2009; Savage & Burrows, 2007), while others remain sceptical

of methodological innovations (see Travers, 2009; Wiles *et al.*, 2011). The entanglement of globalized, technological and societal processes brings sociologists to interrogate what the adequate empirical tools are to grasp complex issues. Specifically, this article responds to a long-lasting need to explore new empirical means to capture the ways in which music mediates everyday life and social relationships (see discussions by Cohen, 1993; Grazian, 2004; Beer, 2009 among others). Because music is a ubiquitous and yet elusive cultural object, practices of music consumption and its mediation of social relationships requires a nuanced empirical approach.

This article revisits friendship as the basis of a methodology that can be refined and applied within the context of semi-structured interviews in music research. Rather than viewing friendship as a methodological complication that is ideally distinct from the context of research, we first argue that its variety of modes, purposes and visibilities in people's lives today, suggests that its incorporation or development within cultural research offers theoretical and methodological opportunities. Friendship not only enables access to diverse cultural practices that individuals are embedded within, it also disrupts *a priori* relationships often assumed between 'classic' social variables and forms of distinction thereby enabling a deeper excavation of the mechanisms through which music operates.

In line with the precepts of the 'cultural turn' in sociology, we also argue in this article that the 'methodology of friendship' (see for example Tillman-Healy, 2003; Taylor, 2011; Owton and Allen Collinson, 2014) is a tool that sheds light upon the intricate ways in which individuals experience their everyday lives and thus, upon how 'everyday life' is a site of contestation and struggle (see Bennett, 2005). Recently adapted from anthropological research<sup>1</sup>, this method is primarily used in participant observations where researchers have the possibility to prolong the time spent with their informants. In these conditions, researchers benefit from a favourable terrain to develop friendship and negotiate the variable of alterity

with their informants, which is the primary tenet to become an insider researcher. However, the methodology of friendship also incorporates intimacies derived from friend-informants, whereby the researcher's existing friendships may be embedded within or overlap with the research space. Where research focuses on cultural contexts that researchers are already embedded within such as music subcultures and scenes and/or where participants are difficult to access, existing networks of friends are often essential to the research as informants. Furthermore, carrying out semi-structured interviews in music research with friend-informants can facilitate the potential for deeper analysis by enhancing the interpretative practice through shared knowledge.

This article explores the potential of both modes of friendship in semi-structured interviews – informant-friends and friend-informants. It is organised into seven sections. Following this introduction, the second section briefly defines the scope and meaning of friendship emphasising variability and levels of visibility and meaning. The third section then looks at the methodology of friendship and its application in recent research including studies of music scenes, in order to discuss how this empirical tool represents a relevant step forward in qualitative sociological research. We then proceed in the fourth section to deconstruct the configuration of semi-structured interviews in order to identify how principles of the methodology of friendship can be implemented within the encounters between the researcher and their informants. The fifth section discusses research on music listening practices in everyday life, before moving on to scrutinise the application of the methodology of friendship to Nowak's research example. The sixth section examines Haynes' research example focused on music and race and offers critical reflections of the changing knowledge relations derived from friend-informants. The seventh section concludes by evaluating the outcomes of the use of this method on research on music and listening practices in everyday life.

## **1. The Space of/for Friendship in Qualitative Sociological Research**

The role and status of friendship in qualitative research is subject to critical consideration within methodological debates about ‘insiderism’ or ‘insider knowledge’ (Browne, 2003), ‘insider research’ (Hodkinson, 2005) or ‘insiders and outsiders’ (Merton, 1972)<sup>2</sup>. Such debates question the differential impact that the degree of social or cultural proximity between researcher and informants or researcher and field of enquiry has on knowledge production. Friendship, along with shared social status derived from belonging to the same social category (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity or sexuality), constitute the two ‘axes of power’ that grant insider status within research (Browne, 2003)<sup>3</sup>. While there is acknowledgement that the insider/outsider dichotomy should be thought of more as a ‘continuum’ and ‘contextual’ (see Nowicka and Ryan, 2015), this is typically based on emphasising how knowledge is produced by social actors that have multi-sited positionality constituted by a variety of combinations of shared or different social characteristics. There is however less consideration of the ways in which friendship itself is defined and experienced over time and precisely how the varying quality, intensity and characteristics of each friendship shapes knowledge production and how in turn this knowledge may have a reciprocal impact on existing friendships themselves. Thus, the implementation of friendship within qualitative research is often akin to a ‘black box’, where although its impact and effect is considered in relation to critical distance, analytical rigour, bias and ethical considerations, its internal dynamics and implementation are opaque.

Pahl and Spencer (2010) explore the salience of contemporary friendship and suggest that there is no consensus on what a friend is, or should be. Moreover, as Rawlins argues, ‘[s]tatic definitions of friendship fail to capture the lived actualities of friendships – their finitude, flexibility, and fragility’ (2008: 13). Indeed, Rawlins sees friendship as manifesting itself in a myriad of ‘varieties, tensions and functions’ (2008: 2). Similarly, Pahl and Spencer

argue that actual friendship incorporates a range of modes, meanings and visibilities such that individuals tend to have a coterie of intimate and non-intimate friends ranging from:

simple relationships based on shared activities, fun or favours, to more complex and intimate ties involving emotional support and trust – from associates and what some referred to as ‘champagne friends’, to confidants and ‘soul-mates’.

(2010: 4)

Friendship therefore, as Rawlins suggests, ‘exist on a panoramic continuum of everyday contingencies’ (2008: 13). In addition, the meaningfulness of the distinction between friendships and relationships with family members is becoming blurred given that, ‘some friends may play family-like roles and some family members play friend-like roles’ (Pahl and Spencer, 2010: 10). Thus, family relationships are potentially qualitatively similar to our relationships to friends and can similarly be experienced through differing levels of companionship, intimacy and support.

In light of the variation in friendship and family experiences and ties, people are therefore better understood as being embedded in what Pahl and Spencer (2010: 14) describe as a ‘personal community’, which refers to an individual’s collection of important personal relationships at a particular time that can be derived from and situated within and across work, leisure, family, cultural and political pursuits. Rawlins (2008) invites us to think about how friendship unfolds ‘across the life course’. Indeed, friendship must not be thought of as a monolithic category, but rather as configured in context by interpersonal relationships. Moreover, we would add that as social media has facilitated friendships and relationships that transcend vast geographical boundaries, the assemblage of personal ties an individual has can also incorporate some that never have any corresponding offline, face-to-face experience.

The issues and topics that researchers develop interest in are often derived from their lived experiences and/or are features of the social and cultural milieus they are embedded within. In this sense, given the relative proximity and/or overlap between researchers and their lived experiences, including their assemblage of personal ties and the sites of sociological interest, the research space does not have to be conceived as elsewhere or somewhere separate – an objectified social space that researchers enter temporarily. Instead, as Browne suggests, they are better conceptualised as spaces where...

researchers and participants come into being through what we do and the dynamics between researchers and participants, there are no pre-existing scripts, actors or spaces that are simply observed. Rather, through research performances and relations we (re)create research accounts, spaces, researchers and participants.

(2003: 134)

Our personal ties in which we are embedded – with both friends and family – are already and inadvertently subject to our sociological gaze. Instead of attempting to methodologically excise research/researchers from their everyday experiences and embeddedness within social and cultural milieu as an attempt to seek social and critical distance, closer examination of our embeddedness within the research space and how sameness/difference and degrees of intimacy are negotiated is likely to enable the production of more authentic and nuanced knowledge.

Some of the earlier writing on friendship as method, acknowledges these negotiations. For instance, Tillman-Healy suggests that, '[f]riendship and fieldwork are similar endeavours. Both involve being in the world with others. To friendship and fieldwork communities, we must gain *entrée*. We negotiate roles (e.g. student, confidant, and advocate), shifting from one to another as the relational context warrants' (2003: 732). Thus, an important principle of a methodology of friendship is that the research space can be framed as incorporating friendship-



informant relations as an inevitable condition of knowledge production and as a potential site for developing informant-friendships, but nevertheless friendship is a condition that is both subject to sustained analysis and susceptible to change because of the dynamics of research and the shifting nature of insider-outsider relations themselves.

## **2. Insider Knowledge and Accounting for Experiences in Qualitative Research**

The methodology of friendship, has recently been adopted from the field of anthropology and on balance more attention has been paid to informant-friendships, that is, those ties that develop because of closeness and proximity during fieldwork. Indeed, Oakley's incorporation of elements of friendship into research interviews for women was described as 'a "transition to friendship", based on shared gender subordination' (2016: 196) and thus, about developing/assuming informant-friendships. In this section, we discuss and assess some examples where alterity between researchers and participants has been negotiated. By discussing research examples focused on subcultures and scenes where alterity between researchers and participants has been negotiated, we identify some of the important elements of a methodology of friendship that require consideration in sociological studies of culture.

In an essay tackling the idea of 'insider knowledge', Andy Bennett notes that '... several researchers have cited [...] pre-existing ties with their chosen research topic as a clear methodological advantage over researches with no such connection' (2003: 189). He notably refers to the work of Ben Malbon (1999) on clubbing<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Malbon states that his prior belonging to this particular music scene, anchoring him as an 'insider', offers him the possibility to gather more accurate information from his fieldwork enquiry:

... My own background as a clubber was, I believe, crucial in establishing my credentials as someone who was both genuinely interested in and could readily

emphasise with [clubbers'] experiences rather than merely as someone who happened to be 'doing a project' on nightclubs as his 'job'. (1999: 189)

Bennett (2003) is however sceptical of the notion of insider knowledge in the way it has been developed by studies following the academic tradition of the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). He argues that there are inherent ethical and methodological issues to this approach, and that there is little evidence about the effectiveness of such method. The most salient ethical issues associated with insider knowledge include the possibility of peer pressure or coercion associated with having insider knowledge as a friend or member of a shared (sub)culture where, as Browne suggests, there is 'a sense of duty or empathy related to participants' own experiences of undertaking research' (2003: 137). Moreover, there is the potential for exploitative relations because both parties may not be fully aware of what the appropriate boundary should be in terms of disclosure and thus whether informed consent has been adequately provided. Pointing out the pitfalls of potential methodological biases in particular, including the lack of critical evaluation and genuine reflexivity about the 'methodological advantages' that such insider knowledge delivers within the research process 'beyond anything more than an anecdotal sense' (2002: 461), Bennett calls for a greater concern for the 'social actors at the center of [the] research' (2003: 195).

Bennett's critique of the notion of insider knowledge as developed by cultural studies theorists is the basis upon which an account of the 'methodology of friendship' can be developed. Indeed, by inspecting the ethical implications of the relationship researchers have with their informants and by carefully examining the degree to which friendship as method manifests itself prior to or during fieldwork, the potential of the methodology of friendship for sociological knowledge can be uncovered. Although it may create a more complex set of ethical considerations with regard to the meaning of informed consent for instance, there is wider acknowledgement that informed consent is an ongoing process in research anyway where the

mode and method of how it is negotiated and achieved is specific to each research context, rather than being a straightforward, one-time agreement (Wiles *et al.*, 2007). Thus, if considered carefully, ‘insider knowledge’ does not jeopardise the ethical and ideological dimensions of sociological research to gather deeper discourses. On the contrary, insider knowledge conditions the inception of principles of friendship within the empirical fieldwork. Several existing accounts have reflexively pointed out the advantages of drawing on insider knowledge and the methodology of friendship in qualitative research (see Brewer, 2000; Edwards, 2002; Hodkinson, 2005; Kong *et al.*, 2002; Merton, 1972; Taylor, 2011; Wolcott, 1999). These discussions have triggered the implementation of this method within various aspects of qualitative enquiries. While no magical recipe exists to ensure a productive management of alterity between the researcher and their informants, the ‘methodology of friendship’ is a toolkit that researchers can appropriate and adapt to the particularities of their specific research, in order to obtain conclusive results and maintain an ethical position. Indeed, the methodology of friendship provides different reflexive tools that researchers can adopt and adapt to the particular case study they embed themselves into. This toolkit does not differ from simply having insider knowledge, but it rationalizes such approach and enables an upstream reflexive and methodological process that precedes the collection of empirical data. In addition to enabling access to a variety of practices that individuals are culturally embedded within, another element of this toolkit is the relative level of intimacy – the degree of emotional and/or cognitive closeness (Jamieson, 2011) – afforded by friend-informant or informant-friend relations which can potentially disrupt elements of competitive individualism and status battles that often configure cultural research where there is a tendency for music/culture to be the means of identity claims.

The empirical work conducted by Jodie Taylor on the Queer scene in Brisbane (Australia) provides a persuasive discussion of the methodology of friendship through the

friend-informant route. By actively participating in the Brisbane Queer scene as an ‘intimate-insider’, Taylor forged friendships with some of its members (2011: 4). Such involvement in the scene configures her approach as a researcher, which brings her to consider the management of the relationship with her informants and the type of data she gathers. Drawing on the work of Roseneil (1993), Taylor identifies three advantages to conducting insider research: ‘deeper levels of understanding afforded by prior knowledge; knowing the lingo or native speak of field participants and thus being “empirically literate”’ (2011: 6). Despite some issues relating to the ‘dilemmas of intimacy’, including ‘professional and personal ethical conduct, accountability, the potential for data distortion’, ‘role displacement or confusion and the vulnerability of friendship’, as well as the interpretative challenges associated with intimacy (2011: 8), Taylor shows the benefits of the method of friendship to gather more accurate and detailed data. She concludes that:

Regular and intimate contact [with informants] not only results in more opportunities to gather data, but it also increases one’s level of perception in relation to body language and non-verbal communication; sensitive or covert topics; detecting false-truths; emotive behavior; the degrees of affect that something may have upon someone [...]; logics of taste and rationality; an informant’s self-image and their performative attempts at displaying this; and their intended meaning which may sometimes be obscured by incongruous or abstruse language, but is able to be referentially decoded through the researcher’s intimate understanding of past events and/or their knowledge of the informant’s personal history. (2011: 11)

By negotiating alterity with her informants, Taylor found herself in the position of critically examining the embellished ‘truths’. Thus, she argues that informants had fewer possibilities to impress her in their discourses about the Queer scene. Coffey concurs when she argues that,

‘... friendship can help to clarify the inherent tensions of the fieldwork experience and sharpen our abilities for critical reflection’ (1999: 47). Despite what she sees as a risk of ‘bias’, Taylor shows how the methodology of friendship helped her gather a better sense of any process of continuity or disruption that occurred within the Queer scene.

Other studies have drawn upon principles of insider knowledge while succeeding in maintaining a critical distance towards the informants. One compelling instance is Siokou and Moore’s (2008) scrutiny of the rave scene in Melbourne (Australia) in which they aim to understand the structural changes in the scene from the perspectives of long-term participants. As a raver, Siokou has attended ‘... 10 rave/dance parties and 26 clubs’ within the 16 months of her fieldwork enquiry, and she has spent ‘substantial amounts of time at post-event “recovery” parties and in private residences’ (Siokou and Moore, 2008: 51). Despite Siokou’s important involvement in the scene, Siokou and Moore develop a critical and reflexive perspective on claims of ‘authentic belonging’ to a scene that the ravers make. Taking the example of one of Siokou’s ‘research friends’ (i.e. friend-informants) Chloe, Siokou and Moore write: ‘[her] authentic identity is based on participation in an idealized and now defunct golden era, which is inaccessible to “young kids”’ (2008: 56).

Similarly, Overell (2010, 2011) associates a long and personal involvement in the Melbourne grindcore/death metal music scene with a critical perspective on its display of masculinity and brutal affective belonging. About belonging to the scene, she writes: ‘[h]aving been a member of the scene since 2003, in “fan” capacity, I drew on personal contacts and employed a ‘snowball’ methodology to broaden the sample’ (2010: 81). Her close ties to the scene however do not represent a risk of bias as she maintains a critical perspective on the performative masculinity,

... through its brutal sensibility, Melbourne grindcore becomes a masculine scene.

This consideration of Melbourne grindcore is neat. Indeed, in terms of

representation, brutal masculinity blasts from every t-shirt, lyric and line of on-stage patter. (Overell, 2011: 205).

The common trend running through the above examples of Overell (2010, 2011), Siokou and Moore (2008) and Taylor (2011), relates to how they all collect deep insights from their friend-informants while maintaining an ethical and critical perspective. Indeed, it is also important to note that researchers, as Browne (2003) suggests, do not necessarily have the same views and opinions or even common lifestyles as friend-informants. Sameness and difference as binaries that define power relations in research should always be subject to ongoing analytical scrutiny and as we reiterated above, these relations are not straightforward. However, while it is problematic to assume that shared social characteristics provides privileged access to knowledge in research, it may be the case that at different points during the research, friendship and/or shared characteristics provide advantage and become more central to the dynamics, access and quality of the research space.

All the accounts discussed in this section use the methodology of friendship on the basis of a strong personal involvement in a cultural scene. We intend to go further by exploring the potential benefits of the methodology of friendship by also discussing its implementation in semi-structured interviews, which is the focus of the next section.

### **3. The Possibility of Friendship within Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews typically touch on the ‘how’ of peoples’ lives (see Fontana and Frey, 2005), or the ‘shape’ of facts – in contrast with the ‘material’ of facts that is the object of quantitative methods (see de Certeau, 1990 [1980]). It is a methodological tool that has been used within sociological contexts since the early 1900s although it has been constituted within broad shifting philosophical phases that have shaped its epistemological meaning and value,

i.e. ‘from positivist rigour, through interpretive reflexivity, to multiplicity and politicization’ (Edwards and Holland, 2013: 12). It attempts to gather discourses on the various ways in which informants conduct their lives, process their thoughts and interact with their environments and their peers. This method sheds light upon data that would otherwise be overlooked, such as ‘people’s subjective experiences and attitudes’ (Peräkylä, 2005: 869). However, the principles defining semi-structured interviews are not a recipe that researchers can repeatedly apply while expecting similar outcomes. Semi-structured interviews require the constant negotiation of alterity between the researcher and their informants, as well as the management of the moments within which the method unfolds.

The dynamics of researcher-informant relations within semi-structured interviews are subjective in that, not only are researchers a necessary part of the research field and interview encounter, in qualitative research more broadly the subjective nature of the data gathered is taken for granted. The challenge faced by the qualitative researcher is then to develop a self-reflexive and critical approach of their own presence in the fieldwork, in order to make sure that this presence is not disruptive, nor problematic. Qualitative research is ‘contextually contingent’ (Wheatley, 1994) on the relationship developed between the researcher and their informants, because ‘... the sensibilities of interviewing are altered with the changing social phenomena that constitute the “interview”’ (Kong *et al.*, 2002: 240). Mason concurs when she writes: ‘[m]ost qualitative research operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual, and therefore the job of the interview is to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced’ (2002: 62). Thus, interviews must be constructed as a complex assemblage – by definition, they consist of a phenomenological encounter between a researcher and their informants. Scheurich suggests that ‘the conventional, positivist view of interviewing vastly underestimates the complexity, uniqueness, and indeterminateness of each one-to-one human interaction’ (1995: 241). The

empirical encounters are defined by a set of signs that each participant reads and interprets accordingly, and which determines the course of the conversation.

Despite the potential disruptions occurring during semi-structured interviews however, there are different approaches to maximize the probability of fruitful empirical encounters and over the last decade or so, many accounts have focused on the topic of semi-structured interviews. Similar to Oakley (1981), Fontana and Frey (2005) argue that the neutrality that once used to define semi-structured interviews is now to be questioned. They advocate for the development of ‘empathetic interviews’, which entails ‘taking a stance, contrary to the scientific image of interviewing, which is based on the concept of neutrality’ (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 696). They suggest that empathy improves the level of understanding between the researcher and their informants. However, compared to interviews with non-friend informants where it takes time to develop trust, established friendship can facilitate flexibility, trust, stronger commitment to research and more authentic dialogue within interviews as there is greater willingness to respond in ways that are ‘similar to everyday interactions’ (Browne, 2003: 137). Moreover, rather than conceiving of qualitative semi-structured interviews through a ‘hit and run’ framework (see Skeggs, 1999; Browne, 2003), where the qualitative research encounter is a one-sided relationship enabling the researcher to gather data for their enquiry, interviews with friends can result not only in more profound and individual testimonies of daily experience, they also produce mutually beneficial outcomes, subject of course to rigorous ethical and methodological procedural accountability and reflexivity.

In this article, we wish to go further. We draw on and extend the principles from accounts discussed by Browne (2003) and Taylor (2011) to conceptualise the implementation of the methodology of friendship within semi-structured interviews. In developing a pro-active approach to the uncertainty of semi-structured interviews, the researcher is not simply reactive to the conditions and unfolding of the encounters with their informants, but they derive benefit



from the situated nature of knowledge by fostering a favourable environment for the gathering of information. Within the moment of the interview, researchers have to draw on their prior knowledge and use it for the sake of data gathering. While there are always assumptions made about participants' prior knowledge in research, which shapes how the conversation develops and the manner through which the communication is conducted (Nowicka and Ryan, 2015), friendship-led communication in semi-structured interviews offers scope for exploring prevailing knowledge pathways with less risk of disruption or tension because of trust, flexibility and the potential for a more authentic dialogue because, as suggested by Browne (2003: 137) above, there is more preparedness to respond in ways that are 'similar to everyday interactions'. Hence, rather than viewing their subjectivity as constituting a potential risk of bias in the conversation, it should be viewed as an instrument to gather more information. Having said that, the process of 'making the familiar strange' (Wright-Mills, 1962; see also Silverman, 2007) is nonetheless an important aspect of subsequent stages of research where data analysis demands that the relations of power defined through 'sameness and difference' afforded by friendship and/or shared social status are taken into consideration.

In the next section, we look more closely at trajectories of the methodology of friendship as they have developed within the context of our research. The first, where experiences of popular music in everyday life were shared and where friendship evolved over time and the second where an assemblage of personal ties was the basis of data generation but which contributed to the production of sociological knowledge that increased distance from the research space.

#### **4. Cases Studies – Friend-informants and Informant-friends in Music Research**

The discussion about adapting the methodology of friendship within semi-structured interviews is critical for research in music sociology, to understand the ways in which music is embedded within personal and social dynamics. A call for further development of ethnographic tools within research on popular music was made by Sara Cohen (1993). Cohen considers that ethnography prevents popular music researchers from developing essentialist accounts of music and its diffusion. Drawing on Geertz (1975: 17), she argues that interviews with informants are essential to understand the articulation between music and individual behaviours (Cohen, 1993; see also Grenier and Gilbault, 1990). Cohen's (1993) call has found an echo in the writing of Grazian (2004) who sees opportunities for the development of ethnography in popular studies. Acknowledging the empirical work that has been carried out by popular music theorists – notably in relation to the fields of production, consumption and lifestyles – Grazian points towards new opportunities for ethnographic studies in the research of popular music. He writes: 'Like music, ethnography is an interpretative practice; it requires participation and improvisation; its presentation invites a multiplicity of meanings as well as self-reflection' (Grazian, 2004: 206). In that regard, the two case studies detailed below are examples of possible new ways to engage with friend-informants and informant-friends in music research. We thus critically reflect upon our empirical research and the outcomes of using the methodology of friendship in music sociology.

#### ***4.1 Uncovering Everyday Practices of Music Consumption in the Digital Age***

The first example draws on two sets of qualitative studies conducted in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast (Queensland, Australia), which explore everyday music listening practices and the various ways through which individuals access music, listen to music and are affected by it. The first set of interviews was conducted between May 2010 and July 2011 with 24 informants, and the second in June and July 2014 with 11 informants, six of whom had already been

interviewed during the first enquiry. The methodology of friendship enabled Nowak to develop some personal ties with several of his informants based on shared musical knowledge and cultural practices of downloading music. He managed to interview some of them again on the same topic three or four years later. Thus, this methodological tool not only provided more detailed discourses on mundane experiences, it also enabled him to develop a longitudinal perspective in his research by comparing some of his informants' relationships with music over time as informant-friends. Empirical evidence from this research can be found in various publications (Nowak, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). The discussion here focuses on the actual ways in which the methodology of friendship has been deployed in the context of this research, and how it has been discursively favourable for the research outcomes.

Nowak's sociological investigation covers the topics related to the sonic diffusion of music on everyday life as well as the interactions that individuals have with music technologies in the age of important digital transformations (see Nowak). In that regard, he brings together analyses such as those by Bull (2007) on uses of the iPod, with those by DeNora (2000) or Hennion (Hennion *et al.*, 2000) on everyday music listening practices (see Nowak, 2014). In the context of this research, the use of the methodology of friendship created the necessary conditions to gather more details about the mundane ways in which individuals interact with music, from downloading it illegally to buying a vinyl disc, listening to it on the commute and being affected by it in various fashions, and to move beyond any social connotations associated with music (in terms of possible issues of cultural legitimacy for instance), which remains a site of distinction and/or of 'competitive individualism' (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, 2013). Indeed, uncovering the mundane practices of music consumption is critical to highlight the multiple meanings that music takes in everyday life, which was the core objective of the research. However, as Hesmondhalgh (2008: 238) argues, 'there are two ways in which music might be the basis of status battles in modern society: in terms of emotional sensitivity of its consumers,

and in terms of its basis for hedonistic pleasure'. The methodology of friendship was implemented as a way to avoid any status battle, or competitive individualism, about music, its meanings and uses. Thus, in this research, the use of the methodology of friendship helped seize the most personal in a mundane sense. It was about finding the means – through alterity and friendship – to encourage informants to talk about the 'boring' facets that make the fabric of social phenomena.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the ways in which individuals access music. In the digital age, the variable of music technologies problematizes the gathering of data on music consumption. Illegal downloading of music has become a preponderant instrument to access music content. Although the practice of illegally downloading music quickly became mundane after its advent in the late 1990s, divulging such sensitive information about such practices to a stranger could be problematic for some informants. Nowak took this element into account and found that, although they were 'strangers' through the methodology of friendship and thus by shifting the tone of the exchange towards an informal conversation that facilitated trust and flexibility, participants were more willing to engage in conversations that are like everyday interactions between friends. Browne (2003: 137) highlights that such conditions may enable participants to be more willing to disagree and not supply the preferred responses in a way that non-friend data is not or at least takes a bit longer to establish.

The methodology of friendship was deployed as a toolkit during semi-structured interviews, in order to make conversations with strangers as informal as possible. Nowak tried to reciprocate the tenets of the methodology without a prolonged involvement in a cultural scene. However, the shared culture between Nowak and their research participants meant that they were able to 'press further' on certain issues. As a result, the research project provided evidence of everyday consumption practices of music in the digital age of music technologies (be these technologies legal or illegal), as well as detailing the different configurations of music

taste (beyond questions of cultural legitimacy and ‘competitive individualism’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) and the relationship between music and the various moments of everyday life. Thus, this empirical research resulted in a contextualization of music consumption practices (thus comprising both mundane uses of music and illegal downloading practices) within everyday life and consumers’ daily habits and practices, whereas other research has largely focused on one type of music consumption, neglecting other technologies and uses of music (Nowak, 2014).

In the end, this methodology resulted in Nowak developing particular friendships with some of his informants. Indeed, Nowak encountered some of the informants at music concerts or festivals, and then maintained contact with some of these informants on social media. Informal conversations continued on the topic of music consumption and music taste for a while, and this even enabled Nowak to follow the development of their consumption practices over time by interviewing some of them again on the same topic a few years later (see Nowak 2015).

#### ***4.2 Friendship and Knowledge Production: Moving from the Inside to the Outside***

The second research example which helps to illustrate how the methodology of friendship shapes research relations and production of knowledge comes from Haynes (2013). This research focused on the production and consumption of world music. Having been involved on the fringes of musical and cultural activity in south-west England and having personal ties with musicians, DJs, promoters and managers who were actively involved in making money from their creative labour, Haynes was able to access respondents through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling by utilising her ‘personal community’ (Pahl and Spencer, 2010) to gather detailed information about their views and understanding of music. Through

participant observation at festivals and gigs and 32 semi-structured interviews from 1999-2001, Haynes explored the meaning, organisation and production of world music and the extent to which ideas of racial and ethnic difference were invoked. Six people from the original research sample were interviewed ten years later in 2009-2010 to determine whether the meaning and organisation of world music had changed significantly in the intervening period.

Not only is the starting point of this second example different to Nowak's because the idea for the research emerged from Haynes' embeddedness within the music scene thus enabling the ability to draw on personal ties to access a wider sample and in some cases, to participate in semi-structured interviews, the trajectory of the on-going research relations also vary. Explaining the impetus for the research in a previous publication, Haynes suggests that it derived from

the fact that although the dominant political views and cultural values expressed by musicians and consumers alike (with whom I had previously come in contact) displayed an antiracist political sensibility, their aesthetic values and musical preferences revealed traces of biological racism and fixed notions of cultural difference. Moreover, unlike other contexts for the study of racism as typically centred around explicit processes of exclusion, the world music context suggested a social space shaped by racialized processes of exoticization that were ambiguous and less explicit. (Haynes, 2010: 83)

So although having shared cultural knowledge of the local world music context as an 'insider' provided the ability to access respondents and make sense of world music discourses, as a graduate research student examining theoretical notions of race, cultural difference and racism from within academic discourses, positioned Haynes too as an 'outsider'. Indeed, over the course of the research through data generation, analysis and critical reflection, the hierarchical meanings and cultural values associated with the classification of music that were emerging

became a source of tension which eventually increased the distance between the research and the cultural context. The distancing came about not because there was a 'preferred' set of responses that Haynes was expecting to hear, rather it was the realisation that there was far less common ground than had previously been assumed. Thus, the negotiation between her 'insider' and 'outsider' sensibilities shifted considerably because of the personal and professional questions the research raised about what it means to participate in a music scene (however peripheral) and share cultural knowledge as friends.

Aspects of these changes can be conceptualised through the process of othering where, as Bott (2010) describes, differences take on a heightened significance within the context of emergent political incongruities between the researcher and participants that were not known at the outset. Researching British migrants in Tenerife employed as lap-dancers in clubs, Bott (2010: 160-161) asks,

But what happens when research subjects, whose 'difference' from the investigator had initially seemed relatively insignificant, become increasingly 'other' to her through the very data collected? As we get to know the people we are researching, our investments in them change. Inevitably we begin to identify/disidentify, like/dislike, familiarize/otherize and this impacts our representations of them in relation to ourselves when we write up our ethical worries and interview data.

Bott was able to examine the differential effects of her own personal and professional subjectivity on data being gathered and the research narrative she eventually produced. The lap-dancing clubs were a source of political discomfort because they 'involved the open sexual objectification of naked or semi-naked women', she also questioned the related power differentials that were intensified by the nature of this research setting and which provoked anxiety regarding the 'exploitative implications of hierarchical research relations' (Bott, 2010: 164-165). In other words, although feminist and political views informed Bott's critical

position in related to the lap-dancing clubs, nevertheless, her position as academic researcher had benefitted from women sharing their personal experiences about their working lives as in her view, sexual objects.

The shifts between insider and outsider, friend and non-friend suggest that negotiating alterity within the context of semi-structured interviews goes beyond a methodology of friendship conceived as fostering research conditions that are ‘open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich’ (Tillman-Healy 2003: 734). The production of knowledge through friendship reveals other conditions that are seldom championed within the context of qualitative research: disagreement and disjuncture. On the former condition, Browne’s research is again instructive as she argues that ‘research spaces, may be similar to everyday interactions where dialogues take a variety of formats’, as such interactions within research can also incorporate disagreements just as interactions with friends in everyday situations also consist of disagreements (2003: 137). Reflecting on this in relation to her semi-structured interviews, Haynes concluded that the shift in knowledge relations was not simply produced through disagreement. Instead, it was more instructive to frame it as an important disjuncture in the perspectives being produced through researcher-informant relations and thus across interview data and compared to fieldwork observations.

According to Lindhof and Taylor (2002: 242), disjunctures in research which capture the differences in meanings being produced by a range of data and methods, ‘prompt the researcher to account for a more complex social reality than was first imagined’. As such, the negotiation of alterity between Haynes and the friend-informants, highlighted their differences in perspective of a music scene thereby increasing the critical distance to the research space. The ensuing knowledge produced from these shifting relations highlighted the intersection of biological, culturalist and postmodern discursive repertoires of ethnic and racial difference reproduced through world music. Thus, the methodology of friendship was beneficial for data



gathering because it helped Haynes get a stronger sense of how music articulates contradictory social dynamics, which also explains the distancing between the researcher and some of the people interviewed. Research relations in studies that depend on friend-informants therefore are likely to be complex given that, in addition to being a friend there may also be shared or different social characteristics affecting such relations – i.e. research relations defined through both axes of power – such that “at times one can be both an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’, same and different. How these connections and disjunctures come to matter differs in relation to situations, contexts and individuals” (Browne, 2003: 136). In this case, the need for academic scrutiny of discourses of ethnoracial difference produced through in-depth interviews began to take precedence over opportunities for experiencing music with some of the participants and ultimately, the shared activities that had been central in defining the existing friend-informant relations inevitably shifted.

### **Concluding thoughts:**

Revoking the idea that research is an objectified social space that researchers enter temporarily, we argue in this paper that alterity is a key issue for social scientists to negotiate in their empirical approach. The position that researchers adopt with their informants is subject to constant refining, and a reflexive approach to alterity enables the proper adjustments to ensure an ethical position in the field, as well as the gathering of more detailed data.

In the critical discussion above we have attempted to show that contrary to popular methodological folklore there is a far more significant role for friendship within the use of semi-structured interviews in the study of contemporary music and listening practices. As a toolkit that researchers can adopt and adapt, the methodology of friendship represents a

potential for gathering more detailed data and for offering a perspectival shift in what we understand to be our field of enquiry at the outset, particularly in the case of music as highlighted above. The accounts of Browne (2003), Taylor (2011), Siokou and Moore (2008) and Overell (2010, 2011) all suggest that conducting empirical inquiries with friend-informants results in greater depth of analyses by improving the interpretative practice through shared knowledge. While they are confronted with issues about what to include in their writings without compromising their positions in the field, they also prove that being an ‘intimate insider’ is not contradictory with developing a critical perspective about some of the practices occurring within these particular scenes.

Furthermore, by drawing on our own music research first we have shown that the important detail of and analytical insights about listening and consuming practices in this age of significant digital and musical transformation can only readily be acquired by side-stepping those distortions that emerge through forms of distinction and attempts at positioning oneself in social space. Semi-structured interviews focused on music invariably invoke some kind of display of knowledge and taste preferences, and thus by establishing friendship or closer ties in the course of the research may circumvent such positioning strategies enabling other discourses to be revealed. Second, invoking a methodology of friendship as the access point for research triggered a critical and self-searching scrutiny of a social world that may have initially been taken at face value. Where once there had been an assumption of shared values and understanding this can change through the negotiation of alterity taking place during the interview process. As such the methodology of friendship was shown not to follow a predictable path but that its adoption can also reveal how the negotiation of research/friend relations can have a critical impact on the production of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest discussions of friendship as method such as that of Tillman-Healy (2003), identifies the ways that the friendship method builds on the tenets of interpretivism along with feminist principles and poststructural work that enables the deconstruction of the researcher/researched binary. Enquiries based on the method of friendship are thus described as 'open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich' (2003: 734).

<sup>2</sup> It was also a critical focus within debates about the principles of a feminist methodology (see for instance Dunscombe and Jessop 2002; Oakley 1981; 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Keeping the two axes of power analytically separate is important as researcher- informant relations can reflect a number of possible combinations of shared or different social characteristics and/or friendship trajectories.

<sup>4</sup> 'Clubbing' is also the focus of Thornton's work (1995). Nevertheless, despite claiming an 'outsider' status to the clubbers, Thornton does not explain how access was achieved, and how her outsider status impacted upon her data collection and knowledge production. See Bennett (2002) for a critique of her work.